

Three Words by Rosy_el

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Summary:

There were three words—none longer than four letters—that frightened Michael Wheeler more than any other combination of words.

He couldn't deny the way he felt about El.

Three Words

Author's Note:

So this was weirdly inspired by something the lovely ValBirch wrote in a comment; how many ways can I say "I love you?" Also a little tissue plug for topangamatthews. :)

I hope you like it.

There were three words—none longer than four letters—that frightened Michael Wheeler more than any other combination of words.

Well, no, that isn't right.

"Goodbye, Mike," scared him the most—those two words sent him horrific nightmares and tear-stained pillowcases.

But these three words were just a step below that.

Mike couldn't deny the way he felt about El Hopper. Not even that first week in November all the way back in 1983, when she was just a *number*—a science experiment with a buzzed head. He knew it then too, somewhere deep in the pit of his stomach.

Nevertheless, he danced around the phrase for years, strategically replacing it with other words and gestures he could only hope El grasped the quiet magnitude of.

December 23, 1984

Mike had asked Eleven if she wanted to come to church with his family, it was the special Christmas session. "Will and Lucas'll be there! Maybe even Dustin if his parents wake him up early enough..."

El looked unsure. "Christmas?"

That got Mike going.

The morning of the 23rd, Ted pulled the car up to the Hopper driveway and honked. “Ted, really?” Karen scolded. “It’s Sunday morning and the neighbors might still be asleep.”

“Not anymore,” Ted replied, leaned back against the leather seat, hands lamely in his lap. This was basically the only time the family made the trip to church, all dressed to the nines. Karen went a little more frequently, but it wasn’t a weekly activity by any means.

Nancy rolled her eyes at her dad from her seat in the Honda station wagon, Holly sprawled out in her lap sleepily, having barely outgrown her old car seat. Both girls were dressed in their nice holiday dresses while Mike choked on the tie pressed up against his throat. He kept pulling on it, hoping to grant himself some more oxygen, to no avail.

He watched on the edge of his seat for El to come outside. The curtains in the front window moved, revealing a groggy Chief Hopper glaring at the Wheeler’s car, clearly half-awake and bewildered. Ted sat up, awkwardly placing his hands on the steering wheel. Nancy smirked.

Then El swung open the door and ran down the front steps. She had on a black dress with a white lace collar, the hem hitting her at the calf. The sleeves were long and a little poofy, matching black tights and flats covering her legs and feet. She carried a red coat in her arms, trying to pull the thing on while running toward the car. Her hair, though brushed carefully, was now a little messy from her hurried departure.

Nancy opened the door farthest from her spot inside the car, careful not to stir Holly. El chewed on her lip upon seeing Mike way in the back seat. He had, of course, picked the back for the two of them to have some (tiny amount of) privacy.

“You can just climb over the seat,” Mike spoke up, scooting to the left to allow her some room. El obeyed, barely missing Nancy with a kick to the face. Ted shook his head and started to pull out of the driveway, jerking El’s body around and sending her plopping right beside Mike in a heap. He grabbed the seat belt for her and wrapped it around her torso carefully, safely clicking the buckle into its place.

A sudden warmth filled both children's—teenagers actually, now that they were thirteen—faces and Mike stumbled for words.

As he watched El straighten her coat and flatten her hair with her palms, the three words floated to his mind. He shoved them away.

"I, uh," his whisper caused El's eyes to drift up, "Your dress looks nice." Mike swallowed. She stared at him. "Pretty," he added.

El grabbed his hand during the nativity scene.

March 2nd, 1985

Mike had stuffed tissues in his pockets every morning since this day.

It was a Saturday and instead of holding a Dungeons and Dragons campaign in the basement like he normally would've, the Dungeon Master suggested a movie marathon. "We don't need to spend ten hours in the basement *every* Saturday," was Mike's meek explanation to the guys on Friday night.

In reality, he wanted to spend a Saturday with El actually being awake.

She liked listening to their campaigns. However, Eleven found participating in them far too confusing ("*But why do I have to roll a thirteen?*") and resigned herself to coloring or reading and using their game as a sort of background soundtrack. Every single time though, Mike would turn around to ask if she was hungry or try to retell a funny story from that week at school, and she'd be passed out cold, one leg dangling off the couch cushion and face all mushed into whatever novel she was absorbing that weekend. Although Mike found it undeniably adorable (though he'd never mention that to Dustin, Lucas, or Will), he got frustrated at their lack of *conscious* time together.

"El," Mike said it dramatically, his usual style, as he led her down the basement stairs, "Today we blow your mind." El smiled excitedly as she saw the basement, her old fort extended to fit all five members of the group. Blankets were strewn four or so feet from the ground, hanging from strategically placed chairs. Pillows and even more

quilts littered the carpet, all fixed around the little basement television the kids often watched VHS tapes on. "Today we show you," insert yet *another* dramatic pause, "*Star Wars*."

Will and Lucas and Dustin were already down in the basement, the four boys building the fort in anticipation for El's arrival.

"She's a literal freaking jedi," Dustin had said while stretching a green and white quilt from chair to chair. *"Do you think she can do jedi mind tricks?"*

"Did you really just ask that?" Lucas pulled his face into a mocking expression, pausing from tossing pillows on the floor. *"You've seen her straight-up murder like thirty people at once."*

"Hey!" Mike cut in, also arranging blankets. Will was on his way, Jonathan insisting that he drive him over rather than Will ride his bike alone. *"No one,"* He gave Dustin a pointed look, considering the curly-haired boy's history, *"asks El to do stupid mind crap, okay? She isn't here to put on some show with her powers."*

Dustin frowned. *"Okay, but, hypothetically speaking here—"*

"Oh, brother," Lucas rolled his eyes as Mike did The Sigh.

"What if, hypothetically, El wanted to do a trick? Like call your toy lightsaber to her hand or something wicked like that?"

Mike shook his head in annoyance. *"Whatever. She can do whatever as long as no one asks her or pressures her into doing it. Alright?"*

Dustin had nodded quickly, coiled curls bobbing up and down under his hat.

So there they were, the introductory blue font rolling up the screen. El sucked it in, totally silent and mouth slightly ajar. Mike hardly paid attention the whole movie, examining Eleven's reactions to each part out of the corner of his eye as the other boys chewed on popcorn loudly.

El was especially intrigued by Luke Skywalker, of course. She watched the lightsabers ignite in fascination. Mike felt pleased with

himself and relieved that El clearly had good taste.

The Empire Strikes Back pulled El's jaw even farther open as she carefully examined Luke's training with Jedi Master Yoda on Dagobah. She saw herself—her own abilities—within these, these... *jedi*. All of a sudden El felt a surge of pride well up in her chest; a feeling she hadn't really ever associated with her psychokinesis before.

So when the boys were about to pop in *Return of the Jedi* and Dustin requested more popcorn, El spoke up.

"I can do it."

The boys didn't even consider what that implied and just nodded. "Do you know how to use the microwave, El?" Mike asked. Lucas picked up his green toy lightsaber and slashed it through the air, fully extending the green-tinted plastic. Dustin grabbed his own—red—and lunged for Lucas. Will forgot his at home and watched from his place among the blankets.

"I'll be right back," El replied. Mike watched her run up the stairs and shrugged, reaching for his blue saber and joining in on the battle.

"Ow, man, watch my freaking finger, will you?" Lucas hissed, nursing his knuckle. Will and Dustin made kissing noises at him.

El returned with a bowl, the inside filled with plain popcorn kernels. "Oh, that's not—you have to heat it up so they all pop," Mike corrected her patiently, offering to take the bowl from her hands. El shook her head and then focused on the bowl, eyes narrowed and the hairs on her arms standing straight up.

"Oh yes," Dustin perked up immediately, dropping his red lightsaber to the ground. In a matter of seconds, popcorn was snapping and dancing around in the bowl, some flying up into the air from the sudden application of heat—all courtesy of El. Mike felt a smile pull at his lips as the other boys cheered and tried to catch the popcorn flying about wildly. El grinned theatrically, happy to pass out the warm popped corn to her friends. A little blood trickled from her nose but she didn't notice. Seeing the excitement on the boys' faces

only heightened her own and she glanced around the room for another jedi opportunity. She found it in the form of Dustin's saber.

Reaching her hand out, the lightsaber jiggled and rolled and then shot into her hand, sparking into an electric red that lit the entire basement. "Holy shit," Lucas murmured. El lit the other two—a brilliant blue and ghastly green glowing in Mike and Lucas' hands. They gazed at the sabers in silent awe, eyes the size of plates. A giant smile found El's mouth but with it came the sudden taste of sharp, metallic blood. Her nose began to stream heavily and the lightsabers flickered out.

"I," El dropped Dustin's saber like it burned and tried to press her hand against the blood spilling from both her nostrils, "I haven't used my powers..." her eyelids drooped and Mike shot his arms out, catching the brunt of her weight on his body as she stumbled.

The blood drenched her lips and her eyes wandered lazily. She was perfectly conscious, just drained and bleeding profusely, sending Mike into a panicked frenzy. "Get something to dry her nose off!" The other three scrambled around. "Does anyone have any damn tissues in this house?!" He pulled his shirt up and pressed it to Eleven's nose, where the fabric quickly became soaked in red. After another minute, the blood came to a stop.

El looked at Mike, tears in her warm eyes. "Your shirt," one of his Batman ones, "I ruined it."

Mike shook his head, brushing it off easily. "I should've had tissues."

After that, Mike was like a magician; able to pull white hanky after white hanky out of his pockets at any given moment.

Those three words had taken so many shapes throughout those few years.

"Are you cold?"

"I'll be waiting right outside, alright?"

"I've got a tissue."

"I made some Eggos."

"Here, take my sweatshirt."

"Yeah, pretty. Really pretty."

It took El a long time to realize how many ways Mike Wheeler had said *"I love you"* over the years; those frightening three words never actually leaving his lips until a strangely frigid February night in 1988.

But that's a story for another time.

Author's Note:

Heh. Are you a little mad? Don't worry, all will happen in time:) Keep leaving prompts (they've been AMAZING so far and I've got lots of ideas jotted down) and comment your favorite part(s) of the story! It's seriously the most rewarding thing about writing; seeing someone else be touched by something you created. It's so awesome. Thank you again for reading.

-Rosy